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ABSTRACT

Elementary school students can learn to write creatively if the teacher offers stimulation through informative and enriching experiences and provides daily opportunities for writing experiences. Enrichment can involve books, field trips, radio, television, guest speakers, maps, and sense experiences--anything that broadens the knowledge of the student. To assist the writing process itself, the teacher can plan sessions for sharing ideas, work with words and imagery, show the students how to observe a pet and describe it, offer first lines for stories, read humorous books and limericks to motivate the students toward lighter writing (or writing for fun), and decorate the classroom with items that challenge students to write about them. In addition to providing for daily writing periods, the teacher should read aloud to the students from all types of literature, especially poetry. Through exposure to a variety of reading, students not only enrich their experiences, but are encouraged to experiment with a number of writing styles. (MAI)

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MAUREE APPLEGATE

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ASSOCIATION FOR CHILDHOOD EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL
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Creative Writing Isn't Magic!

MAUREE APPLEGATE

I shall eternally be grateful to the Murphys for furnishing me with an apt answer to those teachers who say, "I just can't get any creative writing from my children!"

The Murphys shared their conversation with their neighbors. From one conversation I could not help overhearing, I gathered that Mrs. Murphy was just learning to drive. The vast astonishment felt by Mrs. Murphy upon her introduction to the intricacies of the Machina Deo was exceeded only by that of Mr. Murphy as he contemplated the involvements that arise from the meeting of woman (his woman) and Machine.

One evening I heard Mrs. Murphy's light steps tripping to the garage and soon after heard her call out to her husband, "But honey, it won't start!" More steps—masculine steps—followed by an outburst of delighted laughter as its owner roared, *"After all, Mrs. Murphy, it isn't magic—you have to turn it on before it starts!"*

And this is the point where my gratitude to Mr. Murphy rises like cream. "After all, Mrs. Murphy," I always mentally exclaim to those teachers who complain of the lack of creativity of their children, "creative writing isn't magic. You have to turn it on before it starts!"

"Paint a picture!" "Write a poem!" "Create a story!" We glibly ask these things of the children in our rooms from day to day. When children receive such instructions—cold—they are as dismayed as the miller's daughter in the German folktale whose royal husband commanded her to spin straw into gold. They are dismayed and uncreative.

Creative writing is not magic; except for the most creative children, we must turn it on before it will start. But since a child's creativity is not magic, how can it be turned on or released?

Did you ever turn on the faucet at the sink when the water supply was shut off? What happened? No doubt there was first a gurgle of air, then a trickle of water, and soon no water at all.

The teacher who asks a whole class to write on the same subject, without first providing experience in that subject common to all, will get only a thin trickle of creativity at best. For creativity rarely seeks expression unless there is enough experience behind it that children feel they have something to say. Children who have been on a hike or have taken their first train ride are so full of talk that they can easily be guided to write.

That's the test of whether a whole class is ready to write—is it full of talk? Interest, like June in the song, is it "bustin' out all over"? When this is so, almost any teacher can guide any class to write.

USING TEACHING AIDS TO STIMULATE

What are the enriching experiences that a classroom teacher can provide for children so that they will want to write, will be ready to write and will have something to say when they do write? The one-dimensional world of one book was exciting to the early twentieth-century child; but it takes the three-dimensional world of many books, visual aids, radio and television in the hands of a skilled teacher to catch and hold the interests of today's child.

The stimulating teacher is still the Pied Piper who can call the tunes and the children will follow whether the music comes from a mouth organ or a brass band. Teachers are still more important than things. But to aid your own personal magic, you have more teaching aids at your beck and call than Aladdin with his lamp and his ring. You have only to demand them and they will usually appear.

Exciting books, for instance. Books by the dozens, that can double any day for television

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The late Mauree Applegate was a master teacher who knew well how to "get creative writing from children." This article, adapted from her popular, but now out-of-print classic "After All, Mrs. Murphy—," sounds as fresh today as when first published (in When Children Write, *ACEI, 1955).*

and radio. Dozens of books geared to fit the reading ability of every child and as tantalizing to the imagination as the golden promises of a seed catalog. Yet hundreds of schools in America are still geared to one-book classes and the magic carpets often get no higher than the schoolroom ceiling.

Only a dolt could fail to gain enrichment from the exciting "goings on" in today's classrooms: the world of many books, excursions, hikes, radio, television, magazines, wonderful pictures, talks by travelers, exhibits, letters from pen pals, free materials from business houses, maps that do everything but talk, music from every land, folk dances to make children feel other folks through their feet, historical museums alive with dioramas—even the dead past has arisen like Hamlet's ghost to haunt the schoolroom. Dead heroes today are more alive to modern children than live heroes used to be to the children of yesterday. No wonder that the primary child, who had so many exciting books on Lincoln read to her, suggested sending Mr. Lincoln a Christmas card—she "liked that kind man so much."

Fullness out of which to write? Today's fifth grader studying South America, for instance, hasn't a chance to escape stimulation and enrichment. And stimulation and enriched experience can be guided into writing as easily as a youngster can be lured by free ice cream.

Almost any child can be stimulated to write if first stimulated to read, look, and listen in the classsroom.

EXCHANGING IDEA SEEDS OR STARTERS

But will every child write well after stimulation? Of course not. Writing is an acquired skill for most children, as talking is a natural one. Besides, the children in our classrooms fall naturally into three groups:

- a few who have a real talent for writing;
- a few who couldn't write more than a few sentences even if they had a gun at their backs; and
- the largest group—those who are not self-starters at writing but do surprisingly well if stimulated and directed.

We've just discussed methods of stimulation—now about the direction. Most of the stimulation in your three-dimensional classrooms is lost unless you provide special direction before the writing starts.

To be specific, let's pretend that the whole class is to write adventure stories of the cowboys, or gauchos, on the pampas of Argentina. The stimulation via books, movies, pictures and exhibits has been provided. The next step is the exchange of ideas. Remember that the large non-self-starting group in your room lacks ideas. You don't want these children to copy a story, or sit and do nothing, or grow nervous trying to think up stories.

The noncreative always get their ideas from the creative. Be realistic and recognize this fact. Share ideas before writing time starts. Ask the children for idea seeds or starters, such as for a cowboy adventure story. If the stimulation and the information have been provided, ideas will come faster than you can write them on the blackboard.

For example, some child may suggest that a cowboy was hunting stolen cattle and came upon the rustlers unaware (what matters if that idea is in every Western at the Saturday movies; this version will be new to the child). Another may suggest that a cowboy gets caught in a storm with his cattle, another that a baby calf be rescued from wolves (do they have wolves in South America? Direct a bookworm to the encyclopedia). If the class runs out of ideas, add a few of your own.

PICKING AND CHOOSING WORDS

By this time, those children who can be filled with ideas (by anything less than an atomic thought-explosion) will be ready. All you need to do now before the children actually begin writing is to work with words. Why stimulate children to write, why let them exchange ideas for stories and then give them no tools of expression—words?

From their study of pictures and books, the children may suggest words to describe the great plains of Argentina and its gauchos:

- the rich stretches of the pampas grass flowing in the wind like a sea;
- the mahogany faces of the cowboys from long living with the wind and sun; and
- the easy way the gaucho rides his horse and the long, easy lope of his steed, as it covers the flat miles of the pampas.

These suggested words and phrases may not be actually used by any of the children in their writing. But through this exercise children learn to pick and choose their words, as one chooses an apple from the cellar barrel.

Tasting, Feeling, Seeing Words

While selecting and mixing words and phrases, the children become interested in the re-creative aspect of creative writing—learning first to see and to feel, and then to write. For what is writing but seeing and feeling? This aspect of creative writing is the one most often neglected in the elementary school.

For instance, if you would have your children write about their pets, show them how to study each action of their puppies or cats. How does a puppy act when it rushes to meet its master at night? How does it look as it eats? How does it play? In what attitudes does it sleep? A writer is first of all a see-er; accordingly we must in "paint-mixing" time teach our children to see.

Mary, a fourth grader, painted this pen portrait after observing her dog:

This dog is big and stately. He is the color of a chocolate popsicle after it's been licked. He has big eyes and short perky ears. He looks like a member of Congress. My mother said she thought he should have a cigar. His tail sticks straight up in the air and sprouts out like a fountain.

Notice that these children re-created their pets as well as any adult might:

I remember when they were pups, little balls of fur. One of the pups was a golden yellow, like when the sun rises on a beautiful morning. The other pup was the color of deep mahogany. I still wonder if the white stripes around their necks aren't an angel's touch. Their noses weren't short and stubby like a common dog's nose, they were just little black knobs. They had eyes like I never saw before. They were dark brown and way big around. They looked happy yet sad. They were eager, still they seemed to be begging.

—By Tom, a fifth grader

A small colt comes out of a barn, into a beautiful world for the first time. He is so gay that he tries to kick up his heels but falls ker-plump. Up he goes to take a few steps, then falls again. Many a time he falls but each time he gets up. With each fall, he gets up. With each fall, he gets more surefooted. Soon he can walk, run, leap and bound.

—By Karen, a fifth grader

Using Imagery

In the word-study period that precedes a creative writing class, get your children to use picturesque speech or imagery whenever possible. The use of imagery gives one a quick, clear picture and thus is a shortcut to understanding. Show the class how much easier it is to see the basketball player who is described as a "Paul Bunyan of a Fellow" than if he had been said to be merely big. Ask the class to consider the nature of a friend who "could be trusted like an old paper sack." Have the children picture the dog whose "ears droop like wilted flowers whenever he's sad or scolded and he goes and hides like the sun on a cloudy day."

Set the children hunting for imagery in the books they read. I don't think I shall ever forget the little girl who suggested that Lincoln's face was as "lined as a relief map"—an apt phrase for which I had hunted for years. Picturesque speech is poetry in the egg and it comes naturally to children, if the schools foster its use.

CREATIVE WORK DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN

Remember that creative work doesn't just happen any more than a garden just happens. If you want more than an occasional good flower, you must prepare the ground, plant the seed and cultivate the young plants. Two steps for helping children write creatively:

1. *Experience must precede writing.* As Natalie Cole says, "Children cannot create out of a vacuum." Enriching experiences may consist of excursions, hikes, school projects or units, observation of things brought into the classroom, reading, other school lessons, special days, unexpected happenings, individual experiences shared, hobbies, visitors, radio programs, movies and television. Oh, almost anything will enrich the experiences of children and start them writing.

2. *The ground must be prepared and ideas scattered before children are ready to write.* Stimulate the children so that they will want to write. Read poetry or stories, talk things over, plan for a sharing day or project, put out a school paper, listen to a radio program. Only the literary child will write without outside stimulation.

Gather and give vocabulary help on the board in the form of rich words and phrases. Help with specific observations such as how a cat worries a ball of yarn, how a dog acts toward strangers, how a small child listens, how skaters use their arms.

Before writing begins, put ideas on the board for story plots, poetry seeds, characterizations, and story endings. The intensely original won't use the ideas, but many children are not self-starters at creating. Do not make the ideas complete; just make suggestions to give the children a start.

MERELY INVITE THE CREATIVE

Some of the finest creative writing a teacher will ever receive will come not from mass writing but from individual or unassigned writing—writing by the child who loves the taste and feel of words. You need do no more to set these children writing than strike the match or just provide the scratcher.

Every day give the invitation to write. Some days a pictured face on a bulletin board may call out to passers-by, "I have a story written on my face. Can you guess it?" An antique willow-ware platter on display may bear this caption, "I went across the plains in a covered wagon. Will you be my voice and tell my story?"

Sometimes just a mere suggestion will start stories aborning. For instance, ask what stories Paul Revere might have interrupted the night he rode through the villages crying out, "The British are coming."

Creative children need little groundwork; they need setting off, as hounds need a rabbit's scent to send them flying. Yet these children are stimulated more than others by playing with words.

TEACHER, AS STARTER

Unlike children with special talent, the majority of children must be more than stimulated to write; they must be actually started. Reading aloud to them is one of the best ways to start writing. If you want children to write about "imagi-nageries" or funny animals in a make-believe zoo, read from the incomparable Dr. Seuss—*If I Ran The Zoo, Scrambled Eggs Super,* and *McElligot's Pool.* The children won't copy ideas—they will just dare to be funny.

If you want children to write limericks, chuckle with them over Edward Lear's delicious limericks and delightful nonsense. If your aim is to get children to write true humorous stories, write one yourself or read the account of the fight at school in *Caddie Woodlawn*, or how *Little Britches* licked the bully.

If poems of autumn are what you're after, go for a hike with the children absorbing "October's bright blue weather" through all your five senses. Then come back to the schoolroom and read poetry—"O, world, I cannot hold thee close enough" and "There is something in the autumn that is native to my blood." Then "mix paint" fast and furiously, describing the sky and the clouds and ways to tell the lilt of the leaves as they ease themselves to the earth.

And don't forget in your reading to include poetry. Children do so need poetry. Not having it is like never having stars to look at or music to listen to. Children need poetry to lean on, to laugh at, to learn from, to reach for, and to sing with. Children who grow up with poetry have hidden resources in time of need. If you, the teacher, fail them, they may be poor indeed.

What does poetry reading have to do with poetry writing? Poetry reading leads to poetry writing. It sings the cadences of rhythmic lines into children's minds and helps them to make their own writing more rhythmic.

Yes, indeed, if you want children to write, read to them. Read to them, and give them every living experience possible in order that their lives be full. For from fullness comes writing. But you, the teacher, must be the starter, the mover, the primer of that fullness.

After all, Mrs. Murphy, creative writing isn't magic; you have to turn it on before it starts.

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